DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 481 973 EA 032 800

AUTHOR	Goodwin, Bryan
TITLE	Digging Deeper: Where Does the Public Stand on Standards-Based Education? Issues Brief.
INSTITUTION	Mid-Continent Regional Educational Lab., Aurora, CO.
SPONS AGENCY	Charles F. Kettering Foundation, Dayton, OH.
PUB DATE	2003-07-00
NOTE	9p.; Based on the report "Understanding No Child Left Behind: A Report on The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 & Its Implications for Schools, Communities, & Public Support for Education" (Bryan Goodwin, Sheila Arens, Zoe Barley, and Jill Williams).
AVAILABLE FROM	Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, 2550 South Parker Road, Suite 500, Aurora, CO 80014. Tel: 303-337-0990; Fax: 303-337-3005. For full text: http://www.mcrel.org/PDF/Standards/ 5032IR_IssuesBrief0703_DiggingDeeper.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; *Academic Standards; Accountability; Change Agents; Educational Assessment; Educational Change; Educational Improvement; *Educational Legislation; Elementary Secondary Education; Focus Groups; Government School Relationship; *National Standards; Politics of Education; Public Opinion
IDENTIFIERS	*No Child Left Behind Act 2001

ABSTRACT

This issues brief discusses the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Specifically, it reports on the results of focus groups that explored where people stand on standards-based education and whether they are likely to support or abandon struggling schools. The focus groups consisted of more than 60 participants who represented a broad cross-section of the Kansas City, Missouri, community, including students, parents of public- and private-school children, taxpayers who were not parents, educators, business owners, and policymakers. This brief reports on key themes that surfaced during the focus-group sessions. Initially, people expressed opinions on standards that were in line with public-opinion polls that have revealed support for standards, assessments, and accountability. But as the focus-group participants further discussed the issues, four themes emerged: (1) Standards are meaningless without tests, but accountability should be based on more than just test scores; (2) true accountability makes schools more responsive to parents and communities, not to outside officials; (3) parents and students are a crucial yet often missing part of most accountability systems; and (4) the biggest problems with public schools have little to do with standards or academics. (WFA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

EA EATR 0273

ED 481 973

McREL Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning

ISSUES BRIEF

JULY 2003

Digging Deeper: Where Does the Public Stand on Standards-based Education?

by Bryan Goodwin

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

B. Goodwin

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

INTRODUCTION

Passed by overwhelming margins in both houses of Congress, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) was heralded by lawmakers as a watershed moment in the nation's efforts to improve its schools. The Act's stated goal, to "ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education," calls upon our nation's public schools to do something that, as U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige has noted, has never before been done "in the history of human civilization."

NCLB's bipartisan passage, however, belies the growing controversy among many educators and some policymakers over the Act's landmark requirements, including the mandate that all schools must demonstrate that 100 percent of their students test at proficient levels on statewide assessments by 2013–2014. Supporters argue that NCLB will force schools to take the success of all students seriously and provide them all with opportunities for success; detractors argue that the law's mandated goals are unrealistic and could ultimately lead to thousands of schools, if not most, facing drastic sanctions, including state takeover or closure.

Yet amid the growing din of debate over NCLB, we seldom hear the public's voice. Indeed, the general public remains largely unaware of these sweeping reforms and their implications for schools. In light of the tremen-

This brief describes initial outcomes from Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning's (McREL) *National Dialogue on Standards-based Education* — an effort to encourage real public dialogue nationwide on standards-based education. This brief is based on a research report prepared for the Kettering Foundation.

EA 032 800

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

dous challenge posed by NCLB and the ongoing public support that will undoubtedly be needed to accomplish the Act's ambitious goals, it only makes sense to bring the public into this conversation.

This means going beyond phone surveys and other polls, which provide useful snapshots of public attitudes, but rarely let people finish their sentences and express *why* they believe what they do. Moreover, polls and surveys don't give people a chance to think deeply about the issues, deliberate them with their neighbors, and arrive at thoughtful opinions.

To create opportunities for real public dialogue on these important issues, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) launched a *National Dialogue on Standards-based Education* with support from the Institute of Education Sciences within the U.S. Department of Education. As part of this effort, McREL conducted focus groups with more than 60 participants who represented a broad cross section of the Kansas City, Missouri community, including students, public and private school parents, non-parent taxpayers, educators, business owners, and policymakers.

These sessions explored where people stand on standards-based education and whether they are likely to support or abandon struggling schools. This brief reports on key themes that surfaced during these sessions, which we believe have profound implications for policymakers, educators, and community members everywhere.

Parent attitudes on standards-based education

- **53% want to continue standards as planned**
- **34% want standards to continue, with adjustments**
- **Only 2% want to undo standards**
- **Only 11% say their child's school requires them to take too many standardized tests**

Source: (Public Agenda, 2000)

Where the public stands on standards

Initially, people expressed opinions regarding standards that were very much in line with recent public opinion polls that have revealed popular support for standards, assessments, and accountability. (See sidebar.) However, as people further discussed these issues, important nuances emerged, presented here as four key themes:

- Standards are meaningless without tests, but accountability should be based on more than just test scores.
- True accountability makes schools more responsive to parents and communities, not to outside officials.
- Parents and students are a crucial yet often missing part of most accountability systems.
- The biggest problems with public schools have little to do with standards or academics.

Standards are meaningless without tests, but accountability should be based on more than just test scores.

Focus group participants expressed near unanimous favor for using standards and assessment to improve learning. Indeed, we heard no one dispute the need for standards. (It's worth noting that most people,

including parents, were not familiar with their state standards, but when they read the standards, they found them to be reasonable expectations for student learning. In fact, some people were surprised to learn that such standards hadn't always been in place.) In addition, there was near unanimous consent that without some form of testing to measure whether students are achieving the standards, they would be essentially meaningless. Some parents expressed concerns about tests causing their children undue anxiety, but generally parents felt that it was important for them to know how well their children measure up to their peers and the standards. In short, most people see standards and testing as a common sense measure to improve student learning.

Focus group participants, however, expressed widespread reservations about judging schools or students based upon a single measure. These reservations, it seems, are based largely on personal experience and real-life observations about large-scale tests. Some parents, for example, observed that their own children did not perform well on college entrance exams, such as the SAT, but were nonetheless successful in college. Others, including employers, noted that standardized tests bear little resemblance to what they expect of their employees in the real world. Moreover, many seemed to regard test results not so much as measures of school, teacher, or instructional quality, but rather as gauges of factors beyond schools' control, including socioeconomic status, early childhood experiences, and parental support. As one participant said, "Standardized tests take disparate input, yet apply a common yardstick for output."

Accountability measures could have the unintended consequence of making schools less answerable to parents and communities.

True accountability makes schools more responsive to parents and communities, not to outside officials.

People in our groups consistently spoke in favor of holding schools accountable to parents, employers, and taxpayers. But their calls for accountability were couched in complaints about schools and districts (especially larger ones) being unresponsive, impenetrable bureaucracies. As one exasperated woman put it, "The system is so big and so scary, it does the parents in." What we heard suggests that public support for school accountability may need to be understood in this context — as part of a general feeling that there needs to be "cultural change" in schools that makes them more responsive to parents and their communities and view them as equal partners in education.

However, given that most accountability measures have been designed to make schools *more answerable* to state and federal officials, it's possible that these systems could have the unintended consequence of making schools *less answerable* to parents and communities. Indeed, without a change in culture, it's possible to imagine schools responding to the challenges of standards-based accountability systems in a very technical, bureaucratic way. That is, they could become focused on complying with external

mandates, such as raising test scores and filling classrooms with state-approved teachers, while ignoring other largely non-academic concerns that appear to be at the heart of the public's concerns about their schools (as described later in this brief).

Parents and students are a crucial yet often missing part of most accountability systems.

People also tended to talk about accountability as a broad issue of holding the right people responsible for student learning. Most agreed that although teachers and schools are responsible for providing high-quality education in a safe environment, ultimately, student success is the result of family support and individual student motivation, responsibility, and hard work. They said the "big question" policymakers should ask is whether it's fair to hold schools and teachers wholly responsible for student success on statewide achievement tests that often have few or no implications for students and parents. But at the same time, they were wary of "punishing the victims" by putting all of the responsibility on students' and parents' shoulders. In short, they were unsure how to balance accountability with responsibility, but felt strongly that policymakers must attend to this issue.

In every focus group, people's chief concerns about schools were generally about non-academic issues such as safety, discipline, character, and values.

The biggest problems with public schools have little to do with standards or academics.

In every focus group, people's chief concerns about schools were generally about non-academic issues such as safety, discipline, character, and values. Parents were far more worried about "chaos on the playgrounds," bullying, or a general "lack of control" in public schools, than test results. It's worth noting that both minority and non-minority parents were concerned about sending their children to "dangerous" or "unsafe" schools.

This is not to say that academics aren't a concern. Business people often expressed dismay at employees who can't count change or use correct grammar and spelling. Yet their chief concerns revolved around character issues such as personal responsibility, attitudes, and work ethic.

The fact that so much of the public's concerns about its schools revolve around non-academic issues begs the question of whether NCLB's standards-based reforms will address the public's deepest concerns about its schools. It seems that better test scores, in fact, may not necessarily increase public satisfaction with schools. Moreover, by focusing educators on the technical aspects or issues related to education and diverting their attention away from the public's deeper concerns about its schools, it's possible that standards-based reform efforts could further exacerbate what appears to be a growing rift between the public and its schools.

Public support for low-performing schools

In light of the fact that NCLB could result in an increasing number of schools designated as unsatisfactory and facing increasingly severe state sanctions, McREL sought to determine the extent to which local communities would continue to support these schools. Do people see failing schools as a problem that the community needs to come together to solve? Or will they respond to failing schools by moving away or seeking alternatives? The following themes surfaced during these conversations:

- People in urban areas were generally less satisfied with and less supportive of their schools than people in non-urban areas.
- People support public schools more in *principle* than in *practice*.
- Loss of support for schools may be related to a larger loss of community.
- People would like to be more involved in their schools, but often feel shut out.

People in urban areas were generally less satisfied with and less supportive of their schools than people in non-urban areas.

In general, people from rural, small town, and suburban districts in our focus groups expressed far more satisfaction with their schools than did people living in urban districts. It's worth noting that such findings are consistent with the most recent *Phi Delta Kappan* / Gallup Poll of the public's attitudes toward public schools, which found that only 37 percent of urbanites gave their schools a grade of an A or B — far less than suburbanites (51%) and rural residents (53%) (Rose & Gallup, 2002).

When we asked our focus group participants to what extent people in their communities would support local schools if they were identified as low performing, some small town and rural residents insisted that their communities would rally around their schools. Urban residents, on the other hand, observed cynically that people in their communities would respond in the same way they have for the past two decades: by fleeing the district.

Urbanites, however, often ascribed the problems with their schools to what they viewed as society's unwillingness to provide schools in low-income neighborhoods with adequate resources to get the job done. One woman, for example, noted that while suburban parents may complain about their children carrying home 20-pound backpacks full of homework, her niece, who attends an urban high school, has *no* homework because there aren't enough textbooks for all students to take one home.

Some participants saw these differing levels of resources as further evidence of a larger societal battle between the "haves and have nots." Others noted that despite court-ordered desegregation, schools in their communities are now even more segregated. Thus, they saw standards, testing,

Urbanites often ascribed the problems with their schools to what they viewed as society's unwillingness to provide schools in low-income neighborhoods with adequate resources to get the job done.

and accountability as a way to fulfill the goal of *Brown vs. Board of Education*: to provide all students with equal opportunities for academic success.

People support public schools more in principle than in practice.

Most people we listened to, including some parents whose children attend private schools, said they support public schools. Yet few were able to talk about what they're actually doing to support their schools — besides sending their tax dollars to them. One participant observed that, "People support causes when they have an identity relationship. But most people don't seem to have an identity relationship with their public schools."

Parents generally said that their involvement with their schools was limited mostly to occasional confrontations with school staff on behalf of their children. And most non-parents said they'd never set foot inside their neighborhood school. "I live not far from a grade school, but I don't consider it mine," said one empty nester. What may be most striking is that a number of people who said they support public schools in *principle* admitted that in *practice*, they do not. For example, a woman who pulled her child from the public schools confessed that she still believed strongly in public schools, but wouldn't make her son become a martyr for her beliefs.

Participants came to common ground around the notion that community involvement is essential to the success of not only schools, but also to the success of children themselves.

Loss of support for schools may be related to a larger loss of community.

Many participants attributed what they saw as declining public support for schools to a larger trend of fraying community bonds, which they ascribed to a number of factors, such as more households with two working parents, an increasingly mobile society, and the breakup of extended families. As one parent put it, "We've lost our sense of community."

Participants came to common ground around the notion that community involvement is essential to the success of not only schools, but also to the success of children themselves. Evoking the adage that "it takes a village" to raise a child, many noted that the biggest difference between today's children and the children of yesteryear is that today's children no longer have an extended support network of nearby relatives and family friends.

"It used to be that the whole community took responsibility for a kid's behavior," recalled one citizen. "We have to figure out how to get the communities involved," agreed another. "Students need to know people care about them," said one young woman, who was echoed by a parochial school teacher who said, "Students need to know that it's not just the teachers — that the community has a responsibility to help them grow." These conversations eventually gravitated toward some consensus that education is the responsibility of not just schools, but the entire community.

People would like to be more involved in their schools, but often feel shut out.

The good news is that when confronted with the need for communities to support children's learning, both parents and non-parents expressed a general desire to be more involved in their local schools — if only they knew how. "I want to help, but I don't know how," was a sentiment expressed by one participant and echoed by many — including many suburban residents, who said they were eager to help out in not just their own children's schools, but those in struggling urban districts as well.

It was clear from these conversations that participants believe schools need to do a better job of inviting community members in and making them feel welcome. As one man put it, "Schools feel more like a government institution than a church. There's a real disconnect in terms of [community] ownership." Said one woman whose local schools have repeatedly turned down her offers to help, "The schools have to admit they have a problem first. And then they need to open their doors to the community."

Conclusion

NCLB was passed in response to the sense that there was a broad public mandate to address education issues. What we heard in our focus groups confirms that people are, indeed, concerned about education issues and generally support the kinds of standards, testing, and accountability provisions embodied in NCLB. However, what we heard also suggests that people have a host of other concerns that standards-based reforms do not address. In short, the public appears to have an entirely different agenda for school reform than most educators and policymakers. As a result, even if schools succeed in boosting test scores and avoiding sanctions, they could nonetheless fail to increase public satisfaction with or support for public schools.

The themes and insights reported here surfaced not only during the focus group sessions, but also time and time again during several McREL dialogues on standards, involving hundreds of participants. Nonetheless, we anticipate that some readers may question how universally these opinions are held or whether their own communities would echo them.

Such skepticism is healthy — and in fact, could serve as the impetus for convening a local dialogue on standards. Rather than accepting the results of national surveys or responding to anecdotal insights from community members or parents, educators and policymakers should consider engaging their own communities in true dialogue to learn their agenda for reform and tap the energy that comes from inviting them into dialogue about their schools.

The final message for policymakers and educators is this: Clearly, there is a public mandate to improve public schools. However, given the complexity of public opinion about education, this mandate can be easily misread. Thus, educators and policymakers would be wise to sit down with their publics and engage them in genuine dialogue about their schools.

McREL is a nonprofit, nonpartisan education research and development organization dedicated to improving education for all through applied research, product development, and service.

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization guided by a central research question: What does it take to make democracy work as it should?

References

Public Agenda (2000, September). *Survey finds little sign of backlash against academic standards or standardized tests*. New York: Author. Online at www.publicagenda.org/aboutpa/pdf/standards-backlash.pdf

Rose, L. C., & Gallup, A. M. (2002). The 34th Annual PDK/Gallup Poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools. *Phi Delta Kappan (84)*1, 41–57. Online at www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kimages/k0209pol.pdf

This brief is based on the report *Understanding No Child Left Behind: A Report on The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 & its Implications for Schools, Communities, & Public Support for Education* by Bryan Goodwin, Sheila Arens, Zoe Barley, and Jill Williams. A full copy of this report is available online at www.nationaldialogue.org/resources/Understanding.pdf

The National Dialogue on Standards

McREL is sponsoring a nationwide series of dialogues on standards, designed to engage communities across the nation in deliberation on standards-based reforms. McREL's community dialogue materials (participant and moderator guides and conversation-starter video), modeled after the National Issues Forums process, are available at no cost to interested communities. Training on how to organize and moderate community dialogues also is available. For more information, contact Laura Lefkowits, McREL, 2550 S. Parker Road, #500, Aurora, CO, 80014 (303.632.5535, llefkowits@mcrel.org) or visit www.nationaldialogue.org online.

[ISSUES BRIEF

JULY 2003

McREL

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning
2550 South Parker Road, Suite 500
Aurora, Colorado 80014-1678

Nonprofit
US Postage
PAID
Aurora, CO
80017
Permit No. 115

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

REPRODUCTION RELEASE

(Specific Document)

I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title:	Digging Deeper: Where Does the Public Stand on Standards-based Education? Issues Brief.	EA 032 800
Author(s):	Bryan Goodwin	
Corporate Source:	Mid-continent ~~Regional~~ Research for Education and Learning ~~Educational Laboratory~~	Publication Date: July 2003

II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, *Resources in Education* (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following three options and sign at the bottom of the page.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

Level 1

☒

Check here for Level 1 release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic) and paper copy.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2A documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE, AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2A

Level 2A

☐

Check here for Level 2A release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in electronic media for ERIC archival collection subscribers only

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2B documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2B

Level 2B

☐

Check here for Level 2B release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche only

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits.
If permission to reproduce is granted, but no box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries.

Sign here, → please

Signature: Bryan Goodwin	Printed Name/Position/Title: BRYAN GOODWIN, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS
Organization/Address: MID-CONTINENT RESEARCH FOR EDUCATION & LEARNING 2550 S. PARKER RD. STE 500 AURORA CO 80014	Telephone: 303.632.5602 FAX: 303.337.3005
	E-Mail Address: bgoodwin@mcrel.org Date: 10-6-03

(Over)

III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, *or*, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor:
Address:
Price:

IV. REFERRAL OF ERIC TO COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION RIGHTS HOLDER:

If the right to grant this reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

Name:
Address:

V. WHERE TO SEND THIS FORM:

Send this form to the following ERIC Clearinghouse:

ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management
5207 University of Oregon
Eugene OR 97403-5207
Attn: Acquisitions

However, if solicited by the ERIC Facility, or if making an unsolicited contribution to ERIC, return this form (and the document being contributed) to:

ERIC Processing and Reference Facility
4483-A Forbes Boulevard
Lanham, Maryland 20706

Telephone: 301-552-4200
Toll Free: 800-799-3742
FAX: 301-552-4700
e-mail: ericfac@inet.ed.gov
WWW: http://ericfacility.org